The Emotional Topography of the Zainichi Memoryscape: Revisiting Korean Slums in Postwar Japan

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Abstract

Korean shanty towns commonly existed in every large Japanese city from the postwar years through the late 1960s. Japanese people recall them as secluded, dirty, impoverished, and dangerous. To many scholars, their existence confirms the transwar continuity of Japanese oppression of underclass ethnic minorities. But zainichi Koreans who grew up in such slums, which they called tongne, offer spectacular, heroic stories about living there. This article changes the usual focus from Japanese society to Koreans themselves, discussing the important sociopolitical functions of the tongne and their continuing symbolism among the zainichi population. Viewing the tongne as zainichi’s post-liberation place of origin and paying attention to the reproduction of its meanings helps us understand the uneven terrain of power relationships in zainichi society, including why the Chongryun exercised great cultural power at least until the 1970s and still defines the emotional topography of the zainichi memoryscape.

About the Speaker

Sayaka Chatani is Assistant Professor and Presidential Young Professor at the Department of History, the National University of Singapore. She is the author of Nation-Empire: Ideology and Rural Youth Mobilization in Japan and Its Colonies (Cornell University Press, 2018). Her articles on Japanese imperialism and youth have appeared in The American Historical Review, Comparative Studies in Society and History, and edited volumes. She is currently working on a history of community building of the pro-North Korean zainichi people in Cold War Japan.